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## THE DISPUTE BETWEEN GILSON AND MARITAIN OVER THOMIST REALISM

One of the major debates within the twentieth-century Thomist revival was the role of critique in establishing a contemporary, viable solution to the problem of knowledge and in turn its relation to metaphysics. A number of Thomist thinkers accepted the challenge of the modern turn to the subject initiated by Descartes and radicalized by Kant and so attempted to establish an ontology of knowledge, one that defends the legitimacy of metaphysics, by first offering an epistemological critique that justifies the value and validity of knowledge and in turn the reliability and certainty of our epistemic tools in upholding a Thomist realism. Such so-called “transcendental Thomists” include, among others, Joseph Maréchal, Pierre Rousselot, Emerich Coreth, Karl Rahner, and Bernard Lonergan.<sup>1</sup> Without going into the details of their distinct positions, one can state that a general characteristic that binds these varied accounts together is their common *a priori* methodology of establishing metaphysics by beginning with a critique of the

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<sup>1</sup> See Joseph Maréchal, S.J., *A Maréchal Reader*, ed. and trans. Joseph Donceel, S.J. (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), Pierre Rousselot, *The Intellectualism of Saint Thomas*, trans. James E. O’Mahony (London: Sheed & Ward, 1935), Emerich Coreth, *Metaphysics* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), Karl Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, trans. William Dych (New York: Continuum, 1994), Bernard Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, in *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, Vol. 3, ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000).

knowing subject. Étienne Gilson was the most outspoken critic of this transcendental method, arguing throughout *Methodical Realism* (1935) and *Thomist Realism and the Critique of Knowledge* (1939)<sup>2</sup> that if one begins as an idealist, one always ends an idealist. In other words, from the Gilsonian perspective, ontological realism is incompatible with the employment of *critique*, in the strict sense of the term.

Given this situation, Jacques Maritain's self-described "critical realism," which was first articulated in *Réflexions sur la intelligence* (1924) and received its most developed analysis in Chapter 3 of *The Degrees of Knowledge* (1932), offers an interesting place among these noetic accounts. For although Maritain is commonly placed alongside of Gilson in defending a direct Thomist realism, one which affirms the primacy of sensation in the order of knowledge, it has been pointed out that Maritain's critical realism holds a number of affinities with Maréchal's transcendental account. These similarities have been noted by scholars of the twentieth-century Thomism, such as Georges Van Riet, Gerald McCool, and John Knasas.<sup>3</sup>

In this essay, I will begin by providing a brief explanation of Gilson's understanding of critique, and why he thinks a "critical realism" is incoherent. Next, I will show how John Knasas provides a Gilsonian critique of Maritain's critical realism that seems to be susceptible to the same criticisms that Gilson directs toward the Transcendental Thomists. Finally, I will offer a Maritainian response to Knasas in which, I argue, Maritain's account provides a *via media* between the Transcendental

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<sup>2</sup> Étienne Gilson, *Methodical Realism: A Handbook for Beginning Realists*, trans. Philip Trower (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990); and idem, *Thomist Realism and the Critique of Knowledge*, trans. Mark A. Wauck (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983).

<sup>3</sup> See Georges van Riet, *Thomistic Epistemology*, Vol. I and II, trans. Gabriel Franks, O.S.B. (St. Louis: Herder Book Co., 1963), Gerald A. McCool, *From Unity to Pluralism: The Internal Evolution of Thomism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1989), Gerald A. McCool, *The Neo-Thomists* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1994), John F. X. Knasas, *Being and Some Twentieth-Century Thomists* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2003).

Thomists, on the one hand, and the strict Aristotelian or *a posteriori* Thomists, on the other.

### **The Term “Critical” and the Starting Point of Metaphysics**

If there were any lingering doubts in the wake of *Methodical Realism* regarding why Gilson was so insistent that the pairing of the terms “critical” and “realism” was similar to affirming a “square circle,” the French publication of *Thomist Realism and the Critique of Knowledge* in 1939 made his reasons unmistakably clear.<sup>4</sup> Initially respondents to *Methodical Realism* had claimed that Gilson’s rejection of critical realism was legitimate only for those whose “critique” follow along Cartesian or Kantian lines. But there are other ways, these defenders claimed, to solve the problem. In *Thomist Realism and the Critique of Knowledge*, however, Gilson points out that the crucial distinction is not how one *solves* the problem, but rather how one *poses* the problem. For the distinctive feature of Descartes, Kant, and indeed the entire modern epistemological tradition was to begin with a critique of thought in order to determine the source, legitimacy and limits of human knowledge. Insofar as proponents of Transcendental Thomism (or any variety of “Critical Realism”) try to justify realism (and in turn metaphysical first principles) through a critique, they present the problem of knowledge as primary and so reinterpret epistemology as first philosophy. Metaphysics, therefore, is dependent upon critique, rather than the reverse. For Gilson, then, the equivocal aspect of “critical real-

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<sup>4</sup> Actually Gilson admits the notion is not self-contradictory but merely “confused and equivocal.” Gilson states, “An immediate critical realism whose philosophical validity is not immediately evident may not be self-contradictory, but it is certainly a confused and equivocal notion” (*Thomist Realism and the Critique of Knowledge*, 59). Also, because so much controversy among Thomists had erupted over the issue, Gilson refused to authorize a translation of this work until after his death. Hence, the English translation did not appear until 1982, almost forty-five years after the original French publication.

ism” has primarily to do with the starting point of philosophy insofar as realism begins with sensation and the immediate apprehension and affirmation of the extramental real which cannot be doubted; in contrast, “critique” begins with calling into question this immediate apprehension of the extra-mental real by first examining thought in order to determine the extent to which the apprehension and in turn affirmation of actual being are legitimate. Hence, a realist critique seeks to justify the philosophical certitudes of realism by means of a special operation or technique (be it a Cartesian hyperbolic doubt, Kantian transcendental method, Husserlian *epoché*, and so forth). But again, for the immediate realist, one cannot demonstrate that which is self-evident. Thus, the essential question is for Gilson: “Is the realism of the external world sufficient without the critique? Once the question is framed in this way it must be answered with a yes or a no.”<sup>5</sup> Presented in this way, one is forced to choose: either start with critique of knowledge or admit one’s realism is self-evident (and not merely a postulate). And so, for Gilson, “any aspect of a realist philosophy may be subjected to criticism except its very realism.”<sup>6</sup>

Initially, then, it seems that the central epistemological dispute between Maritain and Gilson regarding “critique” is merely a terminological one. For throughout *Réflexions sur la intelligence* (1924), *The Degrees of Knowledge* (1932), *Science and Wisdom* (1940), and *The Range of Reason* (1948),<sup>7</sup> among other works, Maritain hammers home the primacy of sensation. In fact, in *Thomist Realism and the Critique of Knowledge*, Gilson refers specifically to Maritain as one of those thinkers whose employment of the term “critical” was merely to distin-

<sup>5</sup> Gilson, *Thomist Realism and the Critique of Knowledge*, 60.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

<sup>7</sup> See Jacques Maritain’s: *Réflexions sur la intelligence et sur sa vie propre* (Paris: Nouvelle Librairie Nationale, 1926), *Distinguish to Unite or The Degrees of Knowledge*, trans. Gerald B. Phelan (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995) (hereafter as: *The Degrees of Knowledge*), *Science and Wisdom* (New York: Scribner, 1940), and *The Range of Reason* (New York: Scribner, 1952).

guish the Aristotelian-Thomistic noetic from the naïve common sense realism of Reid and others. Likewise, Gilson seems to have Maritain, among others, in mind when he says, “Their realism was therefore styled ‘critical realism’, as opposed to naïve realism of common sense. That is all the more clear-sighted among them wanted to say, and it must be admitted they said it, but it would have been better to have said it differently.”<sup>8</sup> It would have been better since “critical,” in this context, merely signifies “reflective;” and since all philosophy is reflective why not just call it “philosophical realism,” or, better yet, “realism, plain and simple.”<sup>9</sup> In fact, in his most direct reference to Maritain, who in *The Degrees of Knowledge* claims to have shown why Gilson’s “objections against the possibility of a Thomistic critique of knowledge were not unanswerable,”<sup>10</sup> Gilson responds in the following manner:

[I]f critical knowledge is the same as philosophical knowledge, a philosopher who defends any epistemology does it as a critical philosopher, but the word “critical” adds nothing to the concept of philosophy. So it is true that within the philosophical order the expression “critical realism” will lose all distinct meaning (in which case it will not be self-contradictory), or else it will signify a certain manner of posing the problem, which consists of admitting that realism can be a postulate but denying that it is immediately self-evident. The general thesis of the present work is that as soon as “critical realism” acquires a distinct meaning it becomes self-contradictory.<sup>11</sup>

Given these remarks, it would appear that, from Gilson’s perspective, the disagreement with Maritain is merely terminological such that the worst Maritain is guilty of his equivocation. Some later commentators, however, consider Maritain’s account to be more “critical” in the transcendental sense of the word than these passages from Gilson

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<sup>8</sup> Gilson, *Thomist Realism and the Critique of Knowledge*, 50–51.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>10</sup> Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, 85.

<sup>11</sup> Gilson, *Thomist Realism and the Critique of Knowledge*, 52.

suggest. Let us consider, then, this question of just how distinct is “critical” in Maritain’s realism.

### **Knasas’s Gilsonian Critique of Maritain’s Critical Realism**

Knasas readily admits that for Maritain sensation is the ultimate source of knowledge in the intellect’s apprehension of being. Hence, Maritain considers our basic concepts to be abstractions rather than as projections, which indeed distances his account from the school of Transcendental Thomism. Although Knasas readily acknowledges this point, he argues that Maritain nonetheless employs a version of the “top-down” transcendental method of retorsion. Briefly stated, retorsion is the method employed to demonstrate the validity of knowledge by showing that the denial of first principles, such as the principle of identity and in turn the law of non-contradiction, results in a performative contradiction. Transcendental Thomists typically refer to Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, Bk. IV, and Aquinas’s *De Veritate*, Q. 1, Art. 9, to argue that thought is self-validating in its reference to sense reality because it is impossible to truly doubt these *a priori* projections. In other words, any denial of basic metaphysical first principles, such as the principle of identity, contradicts itself in its very denial.

Knasas, however, in following Gilson, argues that all such an argument demonstrates is the necessity of thought to think in reference to reality; that is, the argument in no way validates being as actually real apart from the mind that thinks it, but only that thought necessitates that we think its content *as if* it were real. A Kantian would argue all that has been established is the subjective necessity of thought to think according to its *a priori* categories. Although establishing the subjective certitudes of thought as thought, one remains boxed in, so to speak, and so is left, at best, with metaphysical agnosticism.

Again Knasas is careful to point out that Maritain is not guilty of an unqualified concession to transcendental methodology. For Maritain

maintains that concepts are abstractions rather than projections. Moreover, Maritain does not claim that one can begin, strictly speaking, with thought and arrive at extramental being as actual (as Maréchal seems to do). And yet there is a sense in which Maritain argues that a critical analysis of thought itself is “self-validating.” It is not self-validating in reference to the actual real; rather, critique validates the real as possible. Knasas, in a summary of Maritain’s analysis, puts it this way: “[F]rom our thought alone, we do not know if anything is actual. Our thought does distance itself from reality as actual. Nevertheless, from our thought alone, we do know how reality has to be if it is to be. In short, thought cannot divorce itself from reality as possible.”<sup>12</sup> Whereas for the moderns, thought is “one step further back” in being divorced not only from the actual real but also the possible real, for Maritain, the possible real, along with the certitudes contained therein, is the proper domain of critique. Maritain states, “[I]t is primarily with reference to the possible real that the value of intellectual knowledge ‘is justified’, or better, confirmed or made explicit reflexively, and it is in reference to this that the critique of knowledge should primarily proceed.”<sup>13</sup>

Knasas highlights this passage and wonders whether or not Maritain, in his defense of realism, “has sold the farm.” In arguing that he has, Knasas points to another passage in which Maritain seems to reverse the *a posteriori* and *a priori* approaches to knowledge and hence presents a top-down critique to verify sense apprehension. Maritain says, “Starting from that certainty [of reality as possible], [the intellect] reflexively confirms for itself (‘justifies’ to itself) the veracity of sense and its own certitude of the existence of the sensible world.”<sup>14</sup>

And so, it appears that Maritain does indeed employ a version of the argument of retorsion which reveals the ineluctability of thought to

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<sup>12</sup> John F. X. Knasas, “Transcendental Thomist Methodology and Maritain’s ‘Critical Realism’,” in *Jacques Maritain and the Many Ways of Knowing*, ed. Douglass A. Ollivant (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2002), 71.

<sup>13</sup> Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, 97–98.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 109, n. 75.

think being other than as real (as least as possible); for this reason, Maritain seems to be one short step from validating the real as actual and in turn viewing what initially was perceived as abstractions to projections. Knasas states:

For if retorsion alone can validate our concepts, what is wrong with further construing concepts as *a priori* constitutive projections? Maritain's later disagreements pale in comparison with his earlier concession. Methodologically speaking, more agreement than less exists between Maritain and Maréchal. In fact, one could say that Maréchal's most recalcitrant opponent is Gilson.<sup>15</sup>

Indeed Knasas goes further by suggesting that although Gilson does not explicitly call out Maritain by name in the latter's use of transcendental methodology, Gilson's substantive criticisms (and not just his terminological ones) apply to Maritain's position as well. Knasas states,

If not the persons of Maritain and Garrigou-Lagrange, then their positions is what Gilson appears to have in mind when Gilson says, "If you feel that abstraction should not presuppose its object, it would be far better to stop treating it as an abstraction, since there is no longer anything from which it could be abstracted. Make it the idea of some Cartesian thought, but do not try to play two tables at one time."<sup>16</sup>

If Knasas's reading is correct, the dispute between Maritain and Gilson in their defense of Thomist realism appears not merely terminological but also substantive, at least in terms of methodology. For, as we have seen, Maritain does employ a version of the retorsion argument and so to some extent allows for a kind of *a priori*, top-down critique. But is it the case that Maritain plays "two tables at one time," as Knasas and perhaps Gilson suggest? Or, if he is playing two tables, is it legitimate for him to do so?

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<sup>15</sup> Knasas, *Being and Some Twentieth-Century Thomists*, 109.

<sup>16</sup> Knasas, "Transcendental Thomist Methodology and Maritain's 'Critical Realism'," 73, n. 18.



## A Maritainian Response to Knasas

George Van Riet, in his two volume work *Thomistic Epistemology: Studies Concerning the Problem of Cognition in the Contemporary Thomistic School*, identifies three general ways in which 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Thomists approach the role and value of critique. The first conception is to view critique in a strictly pejorative sense such that it is more or less equivalent to a lived skepticism (this would seem to be the position of Gilson and Knasas). The second conception distinguishes between epistemology and ontology such that epistemology “affords a basis for our certitude of the real while ontology explains it.”<sup>17</sup> The third conception is to insert critique into metaphysics. In this third kind of approach, the aim of critique is to seek out the conditions of the possibility of metaphysics through the use of the general principles of metaphysics. It is this attempt that Gilson finds problematic. For it seems “to want its cake and eat it too.” That is to say, this form of “critique” appears circular in that it employs the metaphysical first principles that the critique aims to justify. Now Maritain’s critical realism seems to include aspects of this third kind of critique, which also shares similarities with the methodology of Maréchal. Does this then make Maritain more of a Transcendental Thomist than is typically thought?

A number of aspects need to be clarified. First, although Maritain’s critique presents both ontological and epistemological components, his approach clearly rejects the claim that ontology is grounded in epistemological critique. Moreover, although his critique unfolds within metaphysics, Maritain, unlike Maréchal, does not attempt to provide the conditions of the possibility of metaphysics in a transcendental manner similar to Kant. Maritain states unequivocally, “the task of critique is purely and exclusively reflexive and secondary . . . it cannot for one single instant dispense with the knowledge of reality.”<sup>18</sup> And so,

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<sup>17</sup> Van Riet, *Thomistic Epistemology*, Vol. 1, 324.

<sup>18</sup> Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, 79.

for Maritain, the epistemological component of critique serves merely as an “apologetic introduction” to metaphysics; the ontological component, which explains the nature of knowledge and the noetic principles that are involved, remains the more significant part of his theory of knowledge. Given this emphasis and its significance, commentators typically focus on Maritain’s ontological account of knowledge, which centers upon the notions of intentional being (*esse intentionale*) and the concept as formal sign (*verbum*), both of which Maritain inherits from the thought of John of St. Thomas. Although these notions are disputed among contemporary Thomists, they provide the basis for Maritain’s strongest and most detailed defense of realism. Our interest here, however, is on the initial, apologetic part of the critique, which is epistemological and shares similarities with the retorsion method of the Transcendental Thomists that Knasas finds problematic. Let us now consider exactly how Maritain understands the role and function of this critique.

*Maritain’s Analysis of  
the Role and Function of Critique*

Although Maritain holds that there is a proper place for critical doubt, such doubt is not to be understood as a real or lived doubt; rather it is a conceived or represented one; that is, it is a signified doubt that is presented as a universal problematizing. In regard to this universal problematizing, it is significant that Maritain in the center of his critical realist account devotes a number of pages to a discussion of phenomenology. Commentators typically interpret these pages as an adamant rejection of phenomenological method in that through an attempt to overcome the realist-idealist debate, Husserl merely produces another version of idealism. However, I would suggest that a close reading of the passage reveals that although Maritain does reject the Husserlean *epoché*, which essentially divorces the thing from the object (and which ultimately leads to an idealist reconstruction of reality), Maritain nevertheless supports the *reflexive practice* of critically examining the *cogi-*

*tata as cogitata*; this descriptive analysis reveals the formal structure of thought along with the objective content of knowledge in the mind's reflexive turn upon itself. Maritain states,

[W]hat is to be retained of phenomenology (after decanting it), and of the "discoveries" in which it glories, belongs only to the reflexive and critical part of philosophy. The 'transcendental experience' it disengages is, in what is authentic about it, only the mind's critical reflection upon itself . . . The first phase of phenomenology (the description of the *cogitata* as such) presents from this point of view, much more interest than does the second phase (the utterly artificial reconstituting of the 'a priori structure' of universal reality.<sup>19</sup>

In fact, in practicing this reflexive turn, Maritain employs, it seems, a kind of phenomenological reflection, though stripped of its transcendental excesses. For the main problem with Husserl's phenomenology, as with other forms of modern idealism, is that it artificially separates object and thing and so reduces what should be a three-fold distinction into a twofold distinction. That is, it confuses "a possible real with a being of reason" and views "the actual real as the only real."<sup>20</sup> In doing so, it transforms the possible real, attained in the intellectual apprehension of being, into a being of reason, which many modern thinkers take to be a purely phenomenal object.

So although the authentic aspect of phenomenology is its reflexive return to the experience of thought in act, Husserl's *epoche* falls into the trap of modern idealism by its artificial reconstitution of purely ideal objects that deny the thing that is grasped along with the object. But, as Maritain states in *Réflexions sur la intelligence*, "the 'immediate datum' of a critical theory must be the object of cognition *just as it presents itself* naturally without mutilation or arbitrary restriction;" that is to say, an authentic critique must reflect upon the object "with all its

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

immediate content, with the primary aspect under which it appears to the mind, *its pretention to be nothing but the thing itself, the extramental being, 'the ontological object transported within us'.*<sup>21</sup> In contrast, phenomenology's attempt to bracket real existence separates object and thing in an artificial and arbitrary way such that the thing becomes a "problematical lining concealed behind the *object*."<sup>22</sup> Maritain's more authentic descriptive account of the *cogitata*, however, reveals the thing as given along with the object. Whereas ontology *explains* how the certitudes of the real are grasped directly but implicitly in our ordinary acts of knowledge through such notions as abstraction, intentionality, impressed and expressed species, etc., an epistemological critique supplements the ontological account by showing how a reflexive analysis upon the *cogitata* as *cogitata*—that is, as objects of consciousness—reveals the extramental character of knowledge (at least as possible). It does so by showing the absolute impossibility of conceiving the object as a purely phenomenal object. Maritain states,

[B]ecause the power of self-knowledge and self-criticism, of a complete return upon self, is the mind's prerogative, the mind has no need of really emptying itself of its own certitudes in order to verify them critically. The mind can represent itself to itself ideally, as if doubting the very thing of which, *in actu exercito*, it is and remains really certain, in order thereby to find out whether such a doubt is possible. And it is only by such a signified, not lived, suspension of judgment that it can make a critical test of first truths. It is only because it is capable of a perfect return upon itself that it can undertake a description (reflexive) of its *cogitata* as *cogitata* without having any need of practicing Husserl's *epoche* to do so.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Maritain, *Réflexions sur la intelligence*, as quoted in van Riet, *Thomistic Epistemology*, 325 (Maritain's emphasis).

<sup>22</sup> Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, 97.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 108–109.

So in response to Knasas's Gilsonian critique that Maritain seems to be playing two tables at the same time, since his critique considers the *cogitata* autonomously and not as abstractions, my response is that Maritain is merely approaching the same table but from two different sides. It is true that the ontological underside of the table, grounded in sensation, remains foundational; nonetheless, through a universal problematizing, considered in light of the modern turn to the subject, one does begin *critique* from the *a priori* topside but only to demonstrate, through a descriptive analysis of the *cogitata*, the impossibility of the purely phenomenal object of idealism.

*The Principle of Identity and  
the Thing-Object Distinction*

It should be admitted that Maritain's discussion of thing-object in Chapter 3 of *The Degrees of Knowledge* could have been presented in a clearer and more systematically refined manner. Nonetheless, his somewhat dispersed arguments highlight the benefits of this supplementary critique. The pivotal notion upon which the critique rests is the principle of identity that is: (1) grasped in the initial apprehension of being, (2) completed in the judgment, and (3) ultimately resolved in sense intuition. Let us consider these three aspects.

First, if one is true to the descriptive analysis of simple apprehension, one recognizes the first object attained by our intellect is being, which, as Aquinas states in *De Veritate*, is presupposed in all our cognitive acts.<sup>24</sup> Here the distinction must be made between the object of thought and the act of thought, a distinction that is so often conflated within idealism. Moreover, within the apprehension of being, a further distinction must be recognized insofar as the thing (at least as possibly real) is given with and by the object. For along with the presentation of the object according to its essential determinations, there is the aware-

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<sup>24</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *Truth*, Q. 1, Art. 1, trans. Robert W. Mulligan, S.J. (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1952), 5.

ness of being as other, that is, beyond the self and its act of thought. Such recognition leads to the impossibility of thinking the object as purely phenomenal. As Maritain puts it,

All anyone has to do is to take counsel with himself and experience within himself the absolute impossibility in which the intellect finds itself: how can it think the principle of identity without positing the extramental being (at least as possible) whose behavior this first-of-all axiom expresses. A prime object, intelligible extra-factual datum is thrust upon the intellect in the heart of its reflection wherein it becomes aware of its own movement toward its object.<sup>25</sup>

Hence, in being true to the reflexive data of consciousness, being reveals itself as *other*, at least as possibly real.

Moreover, though, a reflexive analysis upon the second operation of thought, which consummates knowledge in the attainment of truth, reveals that if the objects of thought are not considered to be aspects of actual or possible things, then “the proper function of judgment becomes unintelligible.”<sup>26</sup> The reason is that judgment is not a mere logical connector between subject and predicate, but rather the affirmation of the mind’s conformity with things as they are in reality. In the initial, propositional act the mind identifies two objects that differ in notion. In second act, however, the mind, in reflecting upon the propositional object, affirms that it is or is not identical with reality. Whereas simple apprehension separates in the mind what is distinct notionally, judgment unites what is identical in the thing. As Maritain puts it, “what is judgment if not an act by which the mind asserts that a predicate and a subject, which differ in notion . . . are identical *in the thing*, or outside the mind?”<sup>27</sup> Likewise, as Charles Sentrout puts it, the judgment is “the conformity of an identification with an identity.”<sup>28</sup> The proper function

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<sup>25</sup> Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, 100.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

of the judgment, then, is to restore the identity that had been separated in objective apprehension back to its unity within the thing. Maritain goes on to say,

the proper function of judgment consists in making the mind pass from the level of simple essence or simple object signified to the mind, to the level of thing or subject possessing existence (actually or possibly), a thing of which the object of thought (predicate) and the subject of thought (subject) are intelligible aspects.<sup>29</sup>

Here further elucidation can be provided by Maritain's friend and follower, Yves Simon, particularly in Simon's distinction between exhaustive and inexhaustive knowledge, a distinction that demonstrates the function of judgment and the explicit recognition of the relation between thing and object. As Simon explains, in exhaustive knowledge there is no need for judgment precisely because the identification between the subject and predicate is entirely fulfilled in the mental proposition; hence, there is no need to distinguish between object and thing. In inexhaustive knowledge, however, judgement as the enunciative synthesis is required precisely because the thing as transobjective subject reveals itself as more than what is grasped objectively in the predicate. Given the notional or conceptual distinction within the mental proposition, there would be no need to pronounce and affirm its identity unless it were referring to the identity within the thing, i.e., the transobjective subject.<sup>30</sup> Here too, then, Simon's analysis of the phenomenal object in its phenomenality demonstrates the impossibility of a purely phenomenal object—at least, insofar as objective knowledge is inexhaustive.

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>30</sup> See Simon's detailed analysis in Yves R. Simon, *An Introduction to Metaphysics of Knowledge*, trans. Vukan Kuic and Richard J. Thompson (New York: Fordham University Press, 1990), 136–149.

Finally, having verified, through the analysis of intellectual apprehension and judgment, the certainty of real being at least as possible, Maritain suggests its connection to sense knowledge as actual. He says, “Starting from that certainty, [the intellect] reflexively confirms for itself (‘justifies’ to itself) the veracity of sense and its own certitude of the existence of the sensible world.”<sup>31</sup> Although here too Maritain does not elaborate in much detail, Knasas attempts to reconstruct what Maritain has in mind. Knasas states, “we already know that our idea of being is true of all possible being. But we can grasp something true for all possible being only by taking it from some actual being. Now, being is taken from the object of sensation. Hence the object of sensation is actual.”<sup>32</sup> This interpretation seems to me to be correct. But although Maritain does not elaborate in much detail upon sensitive knowledge and its relation to abstractive, intellectual apprehension, his varied comments do suggest that an analogous kind of reflexive analysis can be made of the sense object as presented phenomenally. Maritain describes sensitive knowledge as having an “extensive field of a determined, sensory hue” that “invades us” such that we perceive, along with the proper or common sensible (i.e., the sense object), the “thing of which the sense’s proper object is one aspect.”<sup>33</sup> Moreover, the analysis of sense judgment confirms the actuality of the real thing as given. For in the *iudicium sensus*, the sense “clings to the perceived object as to an existing reality.”<sup>34</sup>

Knasas, however, worries about Maritain’s top-down approach in which the unity of thing-object on the intellectual level confirms the unity of thing and object on the sense level.<sup>35</sup> Such a “top-down” approach betrays the *a posteriori* approach of direct realism. For there seems to be no relation between Maritain’s critical realism project and

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<sup>31</sup> Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, 109.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 101–102.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>35</sup> Knasas, *Being and Some Twentieth-Century Thomists*, 112.



the validation of ideas through sense. Hence, “intellectual perception as such suffices to achieve validation.”<sup>36</sup> I would agree that methodologically there is no relation, precisely because an ontology of knowledge begins with the actual reality of entitative, extra-mental being and works its way inward to the intentional identity of subject and object attained in the concept in simple apprehension and then restored to the phantasm in judgment. In contrast, a problematizing critique begins with the phenomenal object that is attained subjectively within intellectual apprehension and shows, through its descriptive analysis, the impossibility of its pure phenomenality. And yet, it is not clear to me why such a critique, considered as an apologetic introduction and so as a supplement to, rather than a ground for, an ontology of knowledge, is not legitimate, particularly as a response to modern epistemology. For even when Maritain employs terms like “verifies” or “justifies,” he typically puts these terms in scare-quotations. He does so because such terms are merely intended to mean: “reflexively confirms for itself.”<sup>37</sup> So, when Knasas asks in reference to Maritain, “if retorsion alone can validate our concepts, what is wrong with further construing concepts as *a priori* constitutive projections?” I would suggest that what is wrong is Maritain’s repeated insistence that a reflexive confirmation does not *alone* validate our concepts. It merely “humbly confirms” them in an explicit manner such that ontology and epistemology work hand in hand. Once more epistemological critique is intended to supplement rather than ground ontology in the explication of human knowledge.

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>37</sup> Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, 87.

## THE DISPUTE BETWEEN GILSON AND MARITAIN OVER THOMIST REALISM

### SUMMARY

This paper considers the proper location and function of critique in establishing a Thomist realism. The author begins by providing a brief explanation of Étienne Gilson's understanding of critique and why he thinks a "critical realism" is incoherent. Next, the author considers the criticisms made by John Knasas who, from a Gilsonian perspective, argues that Jacques Maritain employs a version of the transcendental method of retorsion in order to justify his realism. Finally, the author offers a Maritainian response to Knasas in which it is argued that Maritain's account provides a *via media* between the Transcendental Thomists, on the one hand, and the strict Aristotelian or *a posteriori* Thomists, on the other.

### KEYWORDS

Thomist realism, critique, epistemology, ontology of knowledge, critical realism, retorsion, principle of identity, thing-object distinction.

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